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SPIRITAN MISSION AND SPIRITUALITY AFTER BAGAMOYO. INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE FROM A LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

The V General Conference of the Latin American Bishops in Aparecida (May 12-13, 2007) took place in the context of a society that has become increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious, and this not only in Latin America but also throughout the world. This is an area that Spiritan mission *Ad gentes* is called to engage with. Thus the XX General Chapter in Bagamoyo (2012) emphasized that “inter-religious dialogue is one of the great challenges of our time and deserves to be a priority of the Congregation.” (Bagamoyo, 1.11)

Cultural and religious pluralism makes itself felt in a very clear and indisputable way, displayed through the means of communication, and which also highlights the conflicts which exist between cultures, ethnicities and religions. In Latin America there is a plurality of indigenous traditions, afro-American and European, signifying that we are peoples from many ethnic origins, cultures and religions.¹

This fact was underlined by the V Conference of Aparecida right from the initial comments of the document which underlined the finding that the “context of religious pluralism” has led to a crisis in Christian identity, making more urgent the living out of a more conscientious and living faith. The more present religious pluralism, the more necessary the conscientious living out of the Christian faith. Religious and cultural pluralism was seen as having been the catalyst behind the need for individual choices, which are personal options provoked by the dictatorship of relativism which through the force of the global culture makes these choices necessary.²

1. Religious Pluralism in Latin America

On deepening their reflection on religious pluralism in Latin America, the bishops made a distinction between believers in Christ within other Christian groups and the difficulty of realizing dialogue with all religious groups. Added to this is the challenge of dialogue with cultures, especially youth culture. This is because of the change in the *language* of post-modernity.³ This *language* has many elements of social and cultural pluralism and this causes problems for family, society and Church in their efforts to pass on the faith. For this reason, the Church should

be involved at the source through influencing cultural evolution at the university level and in the media.

Overall, in the development of the reflection on this issue around the V Conference, pluralism came to be seen not only as a challenge but also as offering a new opportunity for enculturation of the faith of the Church. This latter can be enriched by new modes of expression and values, by the mystery of Christ being better formulated and celebrated in such a way that it offers the possibility of faith becoming closer to life, more Catholic, not just geographically but also culturally. Pluralism is a phenomenon which reveals the many and successive changes produced by the advance in human knowledge and scientific discoveries and technologies. However, one must maintain a critical capacity in all this. One must have bases for choosing, because in the presence of so much cultural and religious data the Christian ought to assume responsibility for developing his own personality and molding his social identity. He must also be conscious of the present tension in cultural and religious pluralism between, on the one hand, the emergence of the primacy of the individual, of freedom, of human dignity and self-awareness, and, on the other hand, a globalized culture which can present itself clothed in individualism, but which instead of recognizing the inalienable dignity of the human person can set itself up as an absolute reality to the detriment of ethics and human relations, thus generating problems, especially within families.

Cultural and religious pluralism always existed. However, writes Libanio:

*To eat is natural; to
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“Meanwhile there is a novelty in the pluralism that has begun in modern times. It is this novelty that strongly challenges Christian faith. Culture demonstrates the capability of the human being to stand back from his own character and surroundings and to find meaning in it and to change it. A hungry animal looks for food. A hungry human being concocts a meal. To eat is natural; to prepare a meal is cultural. There lies the difference. Culture is therefore, a universe of symbols, meanings, representations, imaginations, institutions that the human being creates for the double purpose of developing himself personally and living socially with others.”⁴

Religious and cultural pluralism in the past did not have the same effect as it does in present times: causing division, personal breakdown, internal crises and rupture. Religious pluralism today calls into question a faith lived in peace with others because this faith was considered fully contained in the Catholic

Church or the religion in which it was lived. Now, the faithful are questioned about their faith and are tempted to experiment with or to change their religion, to experience new things because the range of choices is great and they feel at liberty to try new things.

Given the above situation, the V Conference did not play with the Christian faith as if the Christian lived under a singular Christian cultural view. It set out on a new way, that is, through having a personal experience of encounter with Christ.⁵ (Dap 243-254). One must have a personal encounter with Christ. It is from this encounter that should follow the firm conviction to follow him, to be a disciple and to proclaim him to others. The Church should invest in this way forward in order to face up to the great challenge of the new millennium, to continue to proclaim Christ in the context of a multi-religious society where the importance given to inter-religious dialogue by the V Conference of Aparecida forms part of the evangelizing action of the Church.

2. Inter-Religious Dialogue

Christian reflection on inter-religious dialogue (Dap 235-239) during the past few decades has opened up new avenues, permitting at the same time the rediscovery and the re-reading of certain unknown theological approaches, even those foreign to the history of Christian thought. This reflection, new and renewed, is intimately connected with a greater consciousness of religious and cultural plurality; religions co-existing together are no longer an aspect of only some regions of the world, so dialogue is the way forward given this reality.⁶

On the one hand, dialogue is to be subscribed to in the relationships of the common living together of citizens; on the other hand, it responds to the necessity of mutual knowledge through cooperation and exchanges beyond confessional boundaries.

One must recognize that it is difficult to define dialogue in an inter-religious context; dialogue provokes excitement in some people and reserve in others and is almost always a source of misunderstandings. Instead of describing it, one must seek to recognize it in the experiences of encounter, above all in one's manner of being in relation to the other.⁷

Dialogue between partners from different religions can create a space for personal sharing and an openness to the concerns of the other which may not be just intellectual. However, it may also disclose a limit to exchanges and lay open difficulties with mutual understanding. In both cases, one has a duty to

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respect the integrity of the other partner. Apart from respect, the endeavor of dialogue gives witness to the love of Christ. It is an affirmation of life against the forces of destruction and chaos and a participation in the effort of all those who, without any illusions, seek to build up a better human community. Dialogue can never be a secret weapon of aggressive Christian activism, but a way to live faith in Christ with our neighbor and at the service of the human community.⁸

Meanwhile, it must be recognized that the credibility of Christian initiatives at dialogue is frequently put in doubt, not without justification, by partners from other religions, given the ambiguity of the missionary narrative and how Christians preoccupied with proclaiming the Gospel of Christ go about doing this in practice. Without doubt, it would not be realistic to see this ambiguity eliminated once and for all. However, the experience of Christians involved in inter-religious dialogue invites to bringing a double corrective to the above, namely, emphasizing an openness to the witness of the other and calling into question the attitudes and methods of certain missions. Indeed, mutual witness is an inherent part of dialogue with people from different religions. Authentic dialogue will only be established when it is conceived and lived as a mutual engagement of response and questioning.⁹

One of the frequent causes of tension between religious communities is related to “mission.” One is not questioning the right and obligation of Christians and other religious communities of proclaiming their faith. However, this desire to spread the faith and the zeal each one invests in the enterprise should in no way undermine the respect for freedom and the dignity of individuals and communities, nor put in danger civil and inter-communitarian harmony and peace. Many partners from other religions do not hide their suspicion that educational, medical, and philanthropic outreaches are in fact proselytism by another name.¹⁰ Given this context, the debate around the complex relationships between dialogue and religion has been important, as has been demonstrated in the numerous official documents from the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches.

All these documents give witness to a notable evolution in Christian thinking about mission from the point of view of the reality of dialogue. There is an explicit recognition of the tension that exists between the spiritual and moral conditions of an authentic and legitimate inter-religious dialogue on the one hand and the implications for mission theology on the other. It is appropriate that, given this tension, Christians live as best they

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Two extremes can be identified: on one hand there is an exclusivist and intransigent attitude that refuses to grant to non-Christian religions the status of being revealed religions or to recognize their saving value; on the other hand, there is a relativism that considers all religions as being the same.

can in fidelity to Christ, in humility, acknowledging that this tension cannot be resolved. The San Antonio World Missionary Conference (1989) emphasized that Christian witness in the presence of people of other religions presupposes a presence among them, with sensitivity towards their efforts. It implies an affirmation of God working through them and of his love for them, remembering that the mystery of God in Christ goes beyond our understanding and that our knowledge of his saving grace is imperfect. For this reason, Christians are invited to be witnesses and not judges.¹¹

But, apart from this issue, the question of dialogue and mission directs us to a fundamental theological question: how to situate and recognize non-Christian religions in their own otherness, how to take into account religious pluralism in God's plan, and how to understand salvation for members of other religions. It is here, despite the development of a theology of religions, that there remains a space for open reflection, characterized by various directions, propositions and normative principles. Opinions are far from being uniform. Two extremes can be identified: on one hand there is an exclusivist and intransigent attitude that refuses to grant to non-Christian religions the status of being revealed religions or to recognize their saving value; on the other hand, there is a relativism that considers all religions as being the same. The middle ground also has a large spectrum of contrasting positions related to the plurality of contexts and procedures. Many Christians in conscience pursue a middle ground which would allow them to combine their faith in Christ, the one and universal Savior, with a positive understanding of other religious traditions as cherished by God.¹²

3. The Awakening of the Necessity of Dialogue in the Church

John Paul II recognized that the coming to awareness of the need for dialogue was helped by the rapid changes taking place in the world and the deeper awareness of the mystery of the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation.¹³ Globalization has shown an interdependence at all levels of living together and human development, with the demands of peace and religious pluralism making dialogue and encounter more necessary than ever. Also missionary experience has made new approaches possible and has made others aware of the necessity to communicate in new ways with the followers of other religions so that the Church may make itself present and understood by them.¹⁴

Overall, Vatican II is the origin of these new relationships between Christian Churches, other religions and the world. The Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (On the Church in the Modern

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World) and the declaration *Nostra aetate* (On the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) approved the way of dialogue in theology and ecclesial practice. The assertions in *Nostra aetate* gave rise to new ideas in the official language of the Church. The encyclical of Paul VI, *Ecclesiam suam*¹⁵ (On the Church) can be considered the “*magna carta*” for dialogue. The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives, becoming the word, the message and the conversation.

The Council backed many missionary initiatives and both Paul VI and John Paul II through teachings and prophetic gestures played the roles of guides and animators in inter-religious dialogue. Thus, in 1964, during a visit to the Holy Land, Paul VI met with both Jewish and Muslim leaders; in Bombay, he had a meeting with representatives of religions in India saying to them that we are all pilgrims on the road to seeking God. Another important initiative of Paul VI was the setting up of the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions (1964), renamed the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue in 1988. This has become the central Church structure for the animation and coordination of initiatives through dialogue and has played an important role in the guidance of dialogue in the context of the global mission of the Church, connecting proclamation with dialogue. Among the many important initiatives of John Paul II, special mention must be made of his talk to young Muslims in Casablanca on 19 August 1985 and above all the Day of Prayer in Assisi with the leaders of the world religions on 13 April 1986.¹⁶

During his pontificate, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI strove to continue the effort to promote inter-religious dialogue. Regarding inter-religious dialogue, Benedict XVI presented three conclusive theses:

1. It is not by renouncing the truth that the meeting of religions will be possible but in striving more deeply for it. Skepticism and pragmatism serve only as entry points to ideologies that crop up afterwards. Man is not best served by renouncing truth and one's convictions; this only puts one at the mercy of profit and deprives man of his greatness. I need to have respect for the faith of others and a readiness for research of the unfamiliar. Here there could be truth which is relevant to me, might help me correct some presuppositions and guide me forward. I need to seek out in the expressions of different cultures, which might even be upsetting at times, the hidden and deeper reality beneath the external. I need to go beyond the narrowness of my own perception of truth and be aware of my own truth in the context of including the

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other. In this way I can place myself within the project of God with a recognition that I never will be the owner of all the truth of God. I will also recognize that I am always an apprentice journeying in the direction of Truth, but always a pilgrim whose journey never ends.¹⁷

2. One must always seek out the positive in the other, an attitude that sees that other as a help in my search for truth. This does not mean however that one can or ought to leave aside one's critical capacity. Religion offers, one might say, a shelter for the precious peril of truth; however, religion also spreads the truth without ceasing and thus always runs the risk of losing that which it is of its very nature. Religion can become feeble and become something destructive. Religion knows and ought to lead one to the truth but it also has the capacity to cut man off from the truth. An analysis of Old Testament religions shows that it was not long before they lost their meaning. It is relatively easy to criticize other religions, but it is also necessary to be ready to accept criticism, in the same way, of one's own religion. One cannot separate religion and faith. Faith without religion is unreal; religion is a part of the Christian faith and it is in the very nature of Christian faith that it manifests itself as a religion. Among Christians faith can become feeble and turn into superstition, so then it needs to be continually purified on the basis of the truth that shows itself through faith but which at the same time, through dialogue, allows her mystery and infinity to be recognized in a new way.¹⁸
3. This does not mean that mission should come to an end and be substituted by dialogue, where one no longer engages with truth but, above all, only to help one another become better Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists. We are not dealing with this because this would imply a total lack of conviction in which, under the pretext of affirming that which is best in each of us, we would neither take ourselves or others seriously and we would renounce forever the pursuit of truth. Dialogue and mission cannot be seen as opposites but ought to permeate one another. Dialogue is not an endeavor without an objective. On the contrary, it seeks to persuade others to find the truth. Otherwise, it would remain useless. On the other hand, mission can no longer proceed into the future as if the message implied that the subject was until then deprived of all knowledge of God. This may occur with increasing frequency in an

atheistic world, but in the milieu of other religions we meet people who have heard about God through their religion and who seek to live in relationship with him. Given this, the proclamation of the message has to necessarily become a process of dialogue. One does not speak to the other, in this context, of things completely unknown but one reveals for him its hidden depths, that which he has already touched upon through his faith. Also, the person who is evangelizing is not just someone who gives but also one who receives, such that inter-religious dialogue ought to always become a listening to the *Logos* who demonstrates to us unity in the midst of our separations and contradictions.¹⁹

Pope Francis, in his first encyclical *Lumen fidei* affirms that the great gift brought by Jesus was the light of faith and thus in the non-Christian world hunger for the light meant that many would worship the sun. However, this sun was incapable of radiating light on all human existence. Christians, however, enlightened by the light of faith called Christ the true sun “whose rays give life.”²⁰ Dialogue also has the dimension of witness so that all may have the opportunity to know the “light of the world”, who is Jesus the Christ. (John 12, 13).

The General Chapter at Bagamoyo, in its turn, considered that “there ought to be considered four complementary levels to dialogue: the dialogue of daily life, the dialogue of collaboration in common works, spiritual dialogue and theological dialogue.”²¹ These different levels help to build true peace among believers in mutual respect and the refusal to allow oneself to be imprisoned by one’s own fears.” (Bagamoyo, 1,11).

Conclusion

The Document from the V Conference which took place in Aparecida conceded that no knowledge is complete and in this context inter-religious dialogue is realized only in a territory where it is accepted that no participant has a complete understanding of the faith which constitutes their religious identity. As well as this, the knowledge of non-Christian religions among Christians is not very deep²² so that it is necessary “to invest in the knowledge of religions, in theological-pastoral discernment and in the formation of competent agents for inter-religious dialogue” (Dap 238). In the footsteps of Vatican II, Aparecida recognizes that through the breath of the Holy Spirit and other means, the grace of Christ can reach all those that he redeemed, outside of the ecclesial community (Dap 236). One must, therefore, promote a way of life where everyone respects the other and each may have the right to live and express their convictions, in a dialogue through which the testimony of

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one's faith and its proclamation will be embedded. According to Aparecida, inter-religious dialogue can help in the building up of a new humanity, opening up new ways of Christian witness, the promotion of freedom and the dignity of all peoples, stimulating collaboration for the common good, helping to overcome violence based on fundamentalist religious attitudes and educating citizens for peace and harmonious living together (Dap 239).

Pedro K. Iwashita, C.S.Sp.

Translated from the Portuguese by Michael Kilkenny, C.S.Sp.

Endnotes

¹Cfr. Libanio, João Baptista, Pluralismo cultural e Pluralismo religioso, in: Amerindia (org.). V Conferência de Aparecida. Renascer de uma esperança. São Paulo: Amerindia/Paulinas, 2008, 73.

²Ibidem, 73.

³Post-modernity ...or of relating to art, architecture or literature – that reacts against earlier modernist principles, as by reintroducing traditional or classical elements of style or by carrying modern styles or practices to extreme.

⁴Ibidem, 74-75.

⁵The Christian has to have a personal encounter with Christ and as a result of this encounter he has the firm conviction to follow him and be his disciple.

⁶ Cf. Miltri, Tarek. “Dialogue interreligieux”. In: Bria, Ion et alii (Dir.). *Dictionnaire oecuménique de missiologie. Cent mots pour la mission*, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2001, 81

⁷Ibidem, 81

⁸Ibidem, 81-82

⁹Ibidem, p. 82

¹⁰Ibidem, p. 82

¹¹Ib, p. 83

¹²Cf. Knitter, Paul F. *Introdução às teologias das religiões*, São Paulo: Paulinas, 2008.

¹³CF. *Dives in misericordia*, 2; 21.

¹⁴Zago, Marcello. Diálogo inter-religioso. In Karotemprel, Sebastian (dir.). *Seguir a Cristo en la mission. Manual de misionología*. Estella (Navarra): Editorial Verbo Divino, 2000, p. 92

¹⁵Cf. *Ecclesiam suam*, 34-68.

¹⁶Cf. Zago, Marcello, op. cit. p. 93

¹⁷Ratzinger, Joseph. *Die Vielfalt der Religionen und der Eine Bund*. Regensburg: Verlag Urfeld, 2005, p. 117-118.

¹⁸Ibidem, p. 119.

¹⁹Ibidem, p. 119-120.

²⁰Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* IX: PG 8, 195, *apud Lumen Fidei*,

²¹Cf. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), no. 42.

²²Ibidem, p. 119-120